



# BRIEFING

## Migrants in the UK Labour Market: An Overview

AUTHOR: DR CINZIA RIENZO

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[www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk](http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk)

This briefing provides an overview of the employment levels and employment shares of migrants in the UK economy as a whole, and in specific sectors and occupations.

## Key Points

The number of foreign-born people of working age in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to slightly more than 6 million in 2012.

The share of foreign-born people in total employment increased from 7.2% in 1993 to 13.6% in 2012. The share of foreign-citizens in total employment increased from 3.5% in 1993 to 8.3% in 2012.

Compared to the early 2000s, the presence of foreign-born workers has grown fastest in relatively low-skilled sectors and occupations. The increase in the share of foreign-born workers was fastest among process operatives (e.g. transport drivers, food, drink and tobacco process operators), up from 8.5% in 2002 to 25.3% in 2012.

In 2012, 36% of all foreign-born workers working as employees, and 45% of self-employed foreign-born workers lived in London.

## Understanding the evidence

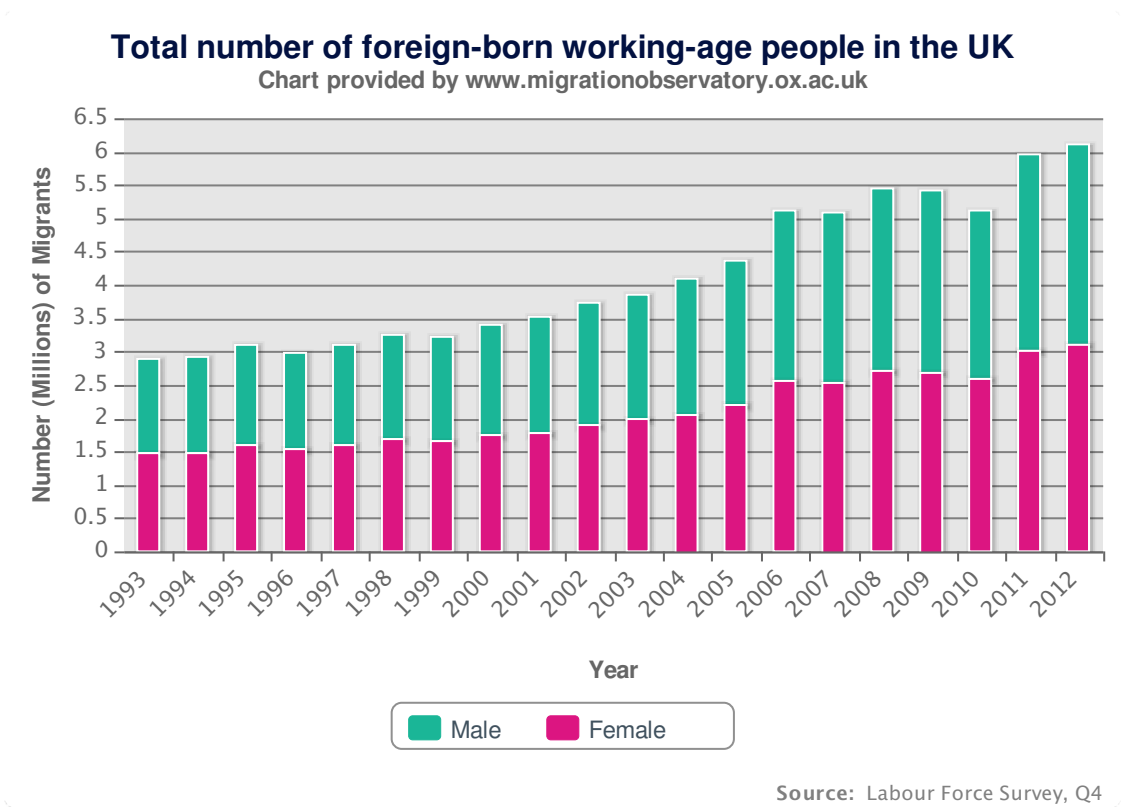
Migrants can be defined in at least three different ways: by place of birth (i.e. foreign-born), nationality (i.e. foreign citizens), and length of stay in the UK. As the foreign-born definition is most commonly used in UK debates and analyses, it is the default definition used in this briefing. Wherever relevant and indicated, this briefing also provides figures for foreign citizens residing in the UK, as well as for recent migrants – defined as foreign-born people who have been living in the UK for 5 years or less. The focus is on those migrants of working age defined as 16 to 64 for men and 16 to 59 for women. The briefing draws on data from the UK's Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted by the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The number of foreign-born people of working age in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to more than 6 million in 2012

The number of working-age foreign-born people in the UK increased from 2.9 million in 1993 to more than 6 million in 2012 (see Figure 1). The annual increases have been mostly positive, but there are a few cases of slight decreases (e.g. 2007, 2009 and 2010). There was a significant jump in the number of foreign-born workers in the UK during 2006, which coincides with the opening of UK labour markets to workers from the A8 countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) in mid-2004.

Since 2005, there has been an even gender distribution in the stock of foreign-born people of working-age in the UK. Before 2005, foreign-born women workers outnumbered men.

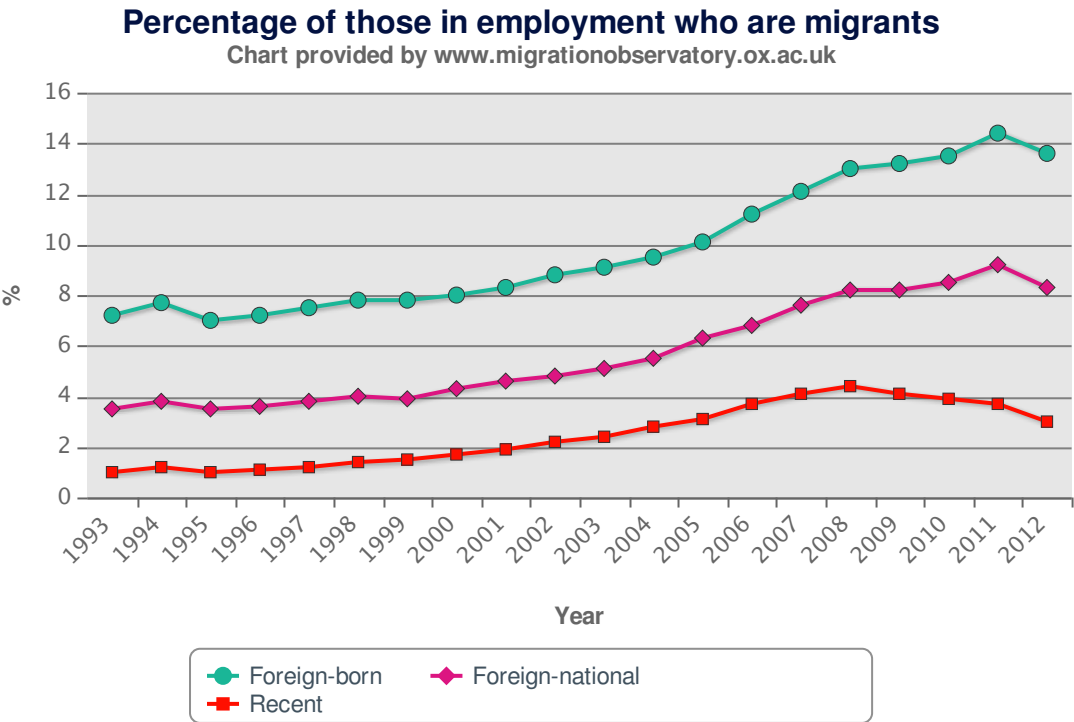
Figure 1



The share of foreign-born persons in total employment increased from 7.2% in 1993 to 13.6% in 2012

Figure 2 shows the share of migrants in total employment. The term “employment” is based on the ILO/OECD definition and refers to all workers aged 16 to 64 for men and 16 to 59 for women who are “at work” both part time and full time as employees, self- employed, under a government scheme or working for a family. The share of foreign-born persons in total employment increased from 7.2 % in 1993 to 13.6% in 2012. In 2012, foreign-citizens made up 8.3% of total employment, up from 3.5% in 1993. The share of recent migrants in total employment increased significantly in recent years although it declined slightly since 2008, possibly due to the global economic recession.

Figure 2



Source: Labour Force Survey, Q1–Q4

**Elementary process plant occupations and food preparation trades have the highest shares of foreign-born workers**

The increase in the share of foreign-born workers in employment in the UK has been highly differentiated across occupations and sectors. Although foreign-born workers have been and remain employed in a wide range of jobs, the growth in employment shares of foreign-born workers in recent years has been fastest among lower-skilled occupations and sectors. In 2002, there was only one low-skilled occupation (food preparation trades) in the list of top ten occupations with the highest shares of foreign-born workers. As shown in Table 1, there are now at least five low-skilled occupations on this list (i.e. elementary process plant, food preparation trade, elementary cleaning, process operatives and elementary goods storage).

In 2012, 41.4% of workers in elementary process plant occupations (e.g. industry cleaning process occupation and packers, bottlers, canners and fillers), 28.4% in food preparation trades, and 26.4% of workers in health professionals (e.g. medical practitioners and dental practitioners) were foreign-born. The increase in the share of migrant labour has been greatest among process operatives (e.g. food, drink and tobacco process operatives, plastics process operatives, chemical and related process operatives) up from 8.5% in 2002 to 28.2% in 2012. As discussed by Aldin et al. (2010) a significant share of relatively skilled recent migrants have taken up employment in less-skilled occupations in the UK.

Table 1 – Top-10 occupations of foreign-born workers, 2012

Top 10 by workforce share, all migrants		%	Occupation share	Top 10 by workforce share, recent migrants		%	Occupation share
(1)		(2)	(3)	(4)		(5)	(6)
1	Elementary Process Plant Occupations	41.4	0.84	Elementary Process Plant Occupations		20.5	0.84
2	Food Preparation and Hospitality Trades	28.4	1.49	Process Operatives		10.7	0.96
3	Health Professionals	26.4	1.65	Elementary Cleaning Occupations		9.2	2.46
4	Process Operatives	25.3	0.96	Cleaning and Housekeeping Managers and Supervisors		8.3	0.23
5	Textiles and Garments Trades	25.2	0.13	Elementary Storage Occupations		8.2	1.39
6	Cleaning and Housekeeping Managers and Supervisors	24.8	0.23	IT and Telecommunications Professionals		6.3	2.67
7	Elementary Cleaning Occupations	24.4	2.46	Assemblers and Routine Operatives		6.0	0.84
8	Elementary Storage Occupations	21.8	1.39	Natural and Social Science Professionals		5.7	0.61
9	Natural and Social Science Professionals	21.7	0.61	Elementary Construction Occupations		5.5	0.48
10	Assemblers and Routine Operatives	21.0	0.84	Food Preparation and Hospitality Trades		5.3	1.49

Note: occupation share indicates the share of total employment represented by the occupation. Source: Labour Force Survey 2012, Q1–4.

## Manufacture of wearing apparel was the sector with the highest share of foreign-born labour in 2012

In 2012 the industry with the highest share of foreign-born workers in its workforce was manufacture of wearing apparel, where about 41.5% of the workforce was foreign-born (see Table 2). The sector with the second highest share of foreign-born workers was manufacture of food products (32.9%) followed by domestic personnel (28.2%).

Table 2 shows that recent migrants concentrate in low-skilled sectors. These include tobacco product manufacturing (15.6% of total employment in the sector), food products manufacturing (14.1%) and domestic personnel (10.7%).

Table 2 – Top-10 sectors of foreign-born workers, 2012

Top 10 by workforce share, all migrants		%	Industry share (%)	Top 10 by workforce share, recent migrants		%	Industry share (%)
(1)		(2)	(3)	(4)		(5)	(6)
1	Manufacture of wearing apparel	41.5	0.14	Manufacture of tobacco products		15.6	0.02
2	Manufacture of food products	32.9	1.18	Manufacture of food products		14.1	1.18
3	Domestic personnel	28.2	0.16	Domestic personnel		10.7	0.16
4	Food and beverage service activities	24.7	3.77	Accommodation		8.7	1.1
5	Accommodation	22.0	1.1	Manufacture of wearing apparel		6.5	0.14
6	Warehousing & support for transport	21.3	1.04	Computer programming and consultancy		6.0	1.88
7	Security & investigation activities	21.1	0.57	Employment activities		5.9	0.67
8	Computer programming and consultancy	20.8	1.88	Services to buildings and landscape		5.8	1.92
9	Air transport	19.6	0.21	Food and beverage service activities		5.7	3.77
10	Residential care activities	19.2	2.85	Warehousing & support for transport		5.5	1.04

Note: sector share indicates the share of total employment represented by the occupation. Source: Labour Force Survey 2012, Q1-Q4.

### In 2012, 36% of total foreign-born workers working as employees, and 45% of self-employed foreign-born workers lived in London

The foreign-born population in the UK is particularly concentrated in London (see the Migration Observatory briefing on 'Migrants in the UK: An Overview'). This is also the case for those migrants who are in employment. As Figure 3 shows, in 2012 about one-third of total migrants working as employees, and 45% of self-employed migrants lived in London. A lower share of recent migrants working as employees lived in London (33%). Meanwhile, about 51% of self-employed recent migrants lived in London.

Figure 3



**Evidence gaps and limitations**

The LFS does not contain information on short-term migrants because the survey excludes individuals who have been resident in their households for less than 6 months (Dustmann et al. 2010). Also, the LFS excludes those who do not live in households, such as those in hotels, caravan parks, and other communal establishments; it also excludes halls of residence, thus missing many overseas students (many of whom are known to be legally working in the UK). Furthermore, the LFS does not include asylum seekers. Finally, the LFS is unlikely to capture migrants working without the legal right to live and/or work in the UK. See the Data sources and limitations section of the Migration Observatory website for further discussion.

## References

- Aldin, V., D. James, and J. Wadsworth. "The Changing Shares of Migrant Labour in Different Sectors and Occupations in the UK Economy: an Overview." In *Who Needs Migrant Workers? Labour Shortages, Immigration, and Public Policy*, edited by Martin Ruhs and Bridget Anderson. Oxford: OUP, 2010.
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## Further Readings

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## Related material

- Migration Observatory briefing – Migrants in the UK: An Overview

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## The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



## COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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## About the authors

Dr Cinzia Rienzo  
Research Associate, COMPAS  
[c.rienzo@niesr.ac.uk](mailto:c.rienzo@niesr.ac.uk)

## Press contact

Rob McNeil  
Head of Media and Communications  
[robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk](mailto:robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk)  
+ 44 (0)1865 274568  
+ 44 (0)7500 970081

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